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Conspicuous Consumption and Comparison Leading Towards Cosmetic Cures

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Introduction

“I used to think there was just fat and skinny. But apparently there’s lots of things that can be wrong with your body,” Lindsay Lohan said, as Cady Heron in the movie, *Mean Girls*. The characters, fittingly play members of a group called “The Plastics,” that is made up of girls whose looks earned them a spot at the top of the status hierarchy, listed off perceived body imperfections, including huge hips, weird hairlines, and nail beds that “suck” (*Mean Girls*). While these aesthetic characteristics seem minute, and even unnoticed by the outside observer, “The Plastics” saw flaws in their quest for aesthetic perfection. The Oxford-English Dictionary defines “perfect” as lacking “any flaw or defect in condition or quality” and “having all required or desirable elements, qualities, or characteristics” (Definition). This definition leads one to ask, “What is considered a flaw or an undesirable characteristic, who determines such, and what motivates people to fix these flaws?” Name one flaw with your own body. If something came to mind, you are not in the minority; Dr. Thomas Cash, a psychologist, found that “85 percent of women and 72 percent of men are unhappy with at least one aspect of their appearance” (Goleman). Many people with such “imperfections,” or those who are unhappy with their appearance, turn towards plastic surgery to modify their bodies to be more aesthetically appealing. This trend in plastic surgery utilization is reflected in both popular and everyday culture, alike.

After reviewing the history and utilization of plastic surgery, this paper will explore the relationship between plastic surgery consumers, plastic surgery’s depiction in popular culture, and the motivations for buying “perfection.” Plastic surgery is a familiar topic in today’s popular culture, being the focus of television reality shows, dramas, and movies. Episodes of *Dr. 90210* and synopses, complemented with YouTube clips, of *The Swan* will be analyzed and compared to plastic surgery statistics and expressed motivations for undertaking surgery. The reality

television show, *The Swan*, entertains viewers with its plot “about an ugly duckling turned beautiful swan, only it's a woman giving herself a physical makeover with plastic surgery, to compete in a beauty pageant” (*The Swan*: IMDb). *Dr. 90210*, another reality television show, also serves as a “mechanism by which we learn to desire plastic surgery,” because the show follows the practices of the best plastic surgeons in Beverly Hills (Essig, 100). Exposure to plastic surgery is also prevalent in the media’s coverage of its extensive use within the celebrity community. Michael Jackson and Joan Rivers will serve as case studies, because of their fame for going under the knife. The motivating behaviors for having plastic surgery reflect Thorstein Veblen’s theories of conspicuous consumption, conspicuous waste, and invidious comparison.¹ Just as individuals see plastic surgery as enhancing one’s physical appearance, the aim of this paper is to enhance the current literature and research through the lens of popular culture. I will argue that despite the cost, due to the lack of insurance coverage, individuals purchase cosmetic plastic surgery services to fulfill Veblen’s theory of conspicuous consumption and invidious comparison, as evident through analysis of personal testimony and television shows such as *Dr. 90210* and *The Swan*, celebrity procedures, and industry statistics.

An Adapted Reason to Go Under the Knife

The practice of plastic surgery has transformed and evolved since its primary use restoring the beauty that once was, to creating the beauty one desires for oneself. While this paper will not encompass the entire history of plastic surgery, due to the expansive number of procedures involved, it will explore plastic surgery’s shift from reconstructive procedures towards emphasizing the idea of self-betterment through “improved” physique. As Jones described, “cosmetic surgery’s focus changed in the twentieth century from fixing war wounds to

¹ Thorstein Veblen was an economist and sociologist of the nineteenth century.

making people more beautiful” (2008, 9). Cosmetic surgery began as a treatment for disfigurement resulting from war. With the invention of more powerful and destructive war weapons, surgeons began to hone their skills, performing many facial reconstructions to counter the disfiguring effects of shrapnel. During WWI, a facial reconstruction unit was created in England, drawing the attention of surgeons from various countries, including the United States, to learn the new surgical techniques (Santoni-Rugiu, 99). Santoni-Rugiu notes that, “until a few years before the war, plastic surgical operations had been performed relatively infrequently by general surgeons [and] the experience of this unit helped establishing Plastic Surgery as a new specialty” (Ibid). As people saw what could be done for soldiers whose faces were demolished in war, one’s desire for personal, aesthetic improvement seemed quite attainable. Recognizing that the market could be cornered, the first professional association for plastic surgeons “was founded in Chicago in August 1921 on the same day that the first Miss America was elected in Atlantic City, showing that beauty was becoming more socially important” (Ibid, 304). What Jones deemed as the “makeover culture” was fueled by this shift to increased aesthetic importance, coupled with the procedural advancement to make such possible (2008, 1). To support this claim, one can review the history of breast augmentation.

Breast augmentations are currently the most popular procedure. The procedure has retained that status since passing liposuction in 2008 (*Quick*; Essig, 21). Coinciding with the new focus on aesthetic beauty, breast augmentation procedures evolved through experimentation to create more natural looking and safe implants. The procedure evolved from using paraffin and lumpy fat injections, to sponges that hardened and were not easy to remove, to direct silicone injections that made people sick, and later to silicone implants (Essig, 17-18). The American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery lists some reasons why an individual would elect to have

this procedure. The organization's name, in itself, stresses the importance of enhanced or, in this case, created beauty. By their criteria, one is a good candidate if you have "the feeling that your breasts are too small, clothes that fit well around your hips are often too large at the bustline, you feel self-conscious wearing a swimsuit or form-fitting top... weight loss has changed the size and shape of your breasts, [or] one of your breasts is noticeably smaller than the other" (*Breast*).

These seemingly trivial aesthetic reasons to increase one's breast size can be anything but trivial to those who elect to go under the knife to rectify the perceived problem. A 1999 Gallup Poll on attractiveness asked, "Now thinking about physical attractiveness, that is, how beautiful or handsome someone is -- how important do you think a person's physical attractiveness is in our society today in terms of his or her happiness, social life, and ability to get ahead? Would you say it is very important, fairly important, not too important, or not at all important?" (Newport). Of the respondents, 35% replied attractiveness was very important, 41% replied fairly important, 17% said not too important, and only 6% answered not important at all (Ibid). This validation of the aesthetic coincides with the argument Jones makes, that in today's "makeover culture the process of *becoming something better* is more important than achieving a static point of completion" (1).

To become something better, one must have an idea of what is "better" and understand the rewards that come from attaining this "better." Society, through popular culture, begins to impact how every individual, often through a trickle-down effect, competes in this aesthetic race to be the aesthetic "best." Even the view of popular culture icons changed to reflect the growing importance of what one looks like. M.G. Lord, in her biography, explains that the popular children's toy, Barbie, morphed from Lord's initial goal to create a doll that looked like a "real-life movie star" to today's interpretation, where "real-life celebrities- as well as common folk-

are emulating her” (Essig, 17). The doll is viewed as the epitome of the female physique, despite the fact that her body was artificially designed and then molded out of plastic. Plastic surgery has made the same possible for people, not just toys.

Improving one’s physique through surgical intervention is an increasing trend. According to the American Society of Plastic Surgeons’ 2012 Plastic Surgery Statistics Report, there has been a 98% increase in the total number of cosmetic procedures performed from 2000 to 2012 (*Cosmetic Procedure Trends*). A total of 14,629,276 cosmetic procedures were performed in 2012, with breast augmentation, eyelid surgery, facelift, liposuction, and rhinoplasty ranking as the most frequent invasive surgical procedures (*Ibid*). To conceptualize this figure, if each procedure was obtained by a separate person, every 1 in approximately 22 people would have undergone cosmetic surgery.² This equates to approximately 5% of the population. As plastic surgery is becoming more commonplace, the importance of aesthetic beauty and its acquisition through surgical intervention is becoming the new norm, resulting in almost \$11 billion spent on cosmetic procedures in 2012 (*Statistics*). Plastic surgery involves both cosmetic and medically necessary, reconstructive procedures. The American Board of Cosmetic Surgery defines cosmetic surgery as “procedures [that] enhance a person’s appearance toward some aesthetic ideal,” while reconstructive surgery, focus “on repairing and reconstructing abnormal structures of the body caused by birth defects, developmental abnormalities, trauma, infection, tumors or disease” (*Cosmetic Surgery*). While critics view cosmetic procedures, such as breast augmentation or face-lifts, as unnecessary, demand for such services combats this criticism. For example, “from 2011-2012, there was a 3.1% increase in the total number of cosmetic surgical procedures” (*Quick*). To break down the demographics of plastic surgery consumers,

² The U.S. population on December 31st 2012 was 315,085,365 people (*U.S.*).

approximately 10.2 million Caucasians, 1.6 million Hispanics, 1.2 million African Americans, and 980,000 Asian Americans obtained aesthetic modifications in 2012, illustrating the culturally diverse demand for and penetrating nature of cosmetic surgery (*Ibid*). The percentage of procedures acquired in 2012 by each race equates to 69.8%, 11%, 8.2%, and 6.7%, respectively. These figures can also be compared to the 2012 US demographic data. According to the US Census, the population was approximately 78% Caucasian, 17% Hispanic, 13% African American, and 5.1% Asian (Population). Thus, Asians were the only race to acquire plastic surgery at a rate greater than their representation in the greater population. However, the relative hierarchical position of each race when comparing them on the percentage of plastic surgery procedures purchased and population percentage was the same.

To break down the industry by sex, the popularity of the breast augmentation procedure is correlated with the overwhelmingly female population that seeks cosmetic surgery. In 2012, women purchased 91% of cosmetic surgery procedures, with women between the ages of 40 and 54 consuming 48% of the total number (*Cosmetic Plastic Surgery*). Women, with their new aesthetically pleasing looks, figuratively take center stage when plastic surgery motivations are explained, which creates a gendered discussion. The majority of the previous research on plastic surgery is presented through a feminist lens and focuses on female subjects. To illustrate this phenomenon, David Marshall writes that, “the intense focus on the body and its reformulation is centered on the construction of the female star” (Jones 2008, 111 as citing Marshall 1997, 266-267). This observation implies that it is only the female star, or woman in general, who is created into this aesthetically pleasing entity. A man does not need to reformulate his body into an ideal to become a star. Thus, the disparity between the rate at which men and women acquire plastic surgery leads one to ask why plastic surgery is linked to gender? While men and women approve

of plastic surgery at similar rates, it is evident that women more frequently seek out cosmetic procedures to fix their flaws. The fact that, in 2012, “49% of men say they approve of cosmetic surgery,” as compared to “53% of women,” alludes to something other than outright objection to aesthetic intervention that results in the difference in procedure acquisition (Cosmetic National Data Bank, 16). Looking retrospectively to the 2007 “10th Consumer Attitudes Study,” the survey conducted by The American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery also found that men and women were again “almost as likely to approve of cosmetic surgery” and also found an 8% increase in the amount of people in favor of plastic surgery from the previous year (America’s Approval). Interestingly, however, females were “16% more likely to consider plastic surgery than men” (Ibid). One correlating factor that helps explain this statistics is that men and women perceive their bodies differently. Green and Pritchard found that women reported less body satisfaction than men at the probability level of $p < .001$, which upholds that this finding is statistically significant and not due to chance (2003, 219).

The plastic surgery statistics listed above reflect conservative estimates of its pervasive use as, “any medical practitioner is allowed to perform cosmetic procedures, but the only data available is through professional groups like the American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery (ASAPS)” (Essig 2010, 20). Any procedure acquired outside of these groups is not reported in the data that supposedly represents America’s plastic surgery utilization. Recognizing the high demand for cosmetic procedures, the American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery offers consumers the opportunity to find suitable providers. Consumers can search the organization’s website by location and desired procedure to find the nearest qualified surgeon, which are all accredited through the American Board of Plastic Surgery (ABPS) (Cosmetic Plastic Surgeons in Massachusetts). Just as it is difficult to determine the exact number of plastic surgeries

performed, it is also difficult to pinpoint the exact number of providers in the United States because “any licensed physician is legally allowed to advertise as a ‘cosmetic’ surgeon, even if he or she has no formal surgical training” (Ibid). Even if the ABPS were to release the number of certificates it issued, this would only reflect the professionals whose focus is limited to plastic surgery and that have met all other Board requirements (Advertising). Because cosmetic surgery consumers purchase services from non-accredited medical professionals, the desire for body modification must be greater than the possible risk of harm resulting from unqualified professionals performing the procedure. Regardless of a consumer’s provider preference, discussions surrounding plastic surgery often focus more on the consumer than the surgeon, especially in popular culture.

The media reports that a movie star underwent a rhinoplasty procedure or a breast augmentation, but often does not report who performed the surgery. While Dr. Renato Calabria has “nipped and tucked half of Hollywood,” most people would not know who he was if mentioned in passing conversation (How Many). Referring to plastic surgery consumption by actors between the ages of 25 and 30, Dr. Calabria approximated that “‘around 40 percent’ have had some form of plastic surgery—nose jobs, breast work, lip injections,” while “‘close to 100 percent’” of actors over 40 have had some work done” (Ibid). Thus, the increase in cosmetic procedures, acquired to compensate for labeled aesthetic shortcomings, is reflected in both the lives of everyday Americans and popular celebrity culture. Why someone would undergo a surgical procedure to have the bump in their nose filed down, their breasts filled with packets of silicone, or the fat sucked from their stomachs has fascinated many, especially with the high cost of acquiring such services and the risks involved. Thorstein Veblen, an economist and sociologist of the early twentieth century, allows for a deeper understanding of why people

purchase plastic surgery and the influence plastic surgery has had within and outside of popular culture.

Veblen: Conspicuous Consumption; Conspicuous Waste; Invidious Comparison

Thorstein Veblen recognizes an emerging social trend that intertwined purchasing power, unnecessary goods, and hierarchical comparison. Veblen argues that one purchases goods to assert one's status. He says, "Unproductive consumption of goods is honorable, primarily as a mark of prowess and a prerequisite of human dignity; secondarily it becomes substantially honorable in itself, especially the consumption of the more desirable things" (Veblen, 69).

People purchase luxury goods as a testament of their wealth, due to the decreased importance of leisure activities.³ As work ethic is now of greater importance than being able to afford unemployment, the criteria for emulation also had to be redefined. He argues that people spend frivolously to establish themselves at the top of the economic hierarchy. Inversely, a lack of spending on luxury goods projects low social status; "Since the consumption of these more excellent goods is an evidence of wealth, it becomes honorific; and conversely, the failure to consume in due quantity and quality becomes a mark of inferiority and demerit" (Veblen, 74).

Veblen's logic can be analyzed through the example of American orthodontic work.

For the majority of Americans, crooked teeth does not mean impeded function. Yet every year, millions of Americans undergo the arduous, expensive, and painful process of getting braces. Williams explains the phenomenon saying, "Teeth aren't any more crooked than in the past. It's just that more teenagers want the perfect smiles that braces can give them, and more parents are willing to foot the bills" (8). This cosmetic procedure, undertaken for aesthetic reasons, mirrors the frivolous spending Veblen describes. Straight teeth have become an example

³ Participation in leisure activities, or activities that are not economically productive, indicated that a person was wealthy because they could afford to spend time not making money.

of social status because one spends money on an unnecessary medical procedure. The example of braces, a procedure that is becoming the norm, reinforces the applicability of Veblen's theory of conspicuous consumption to the purchase of aesthetic procedures, including plastic surgery.

The influence of conspicuous consumption is so strong that it motivates people to purchase luxury goods that are not even evident to the greater society. Andrew Trigg explains this phenomenon saying, "The unconscious cultural force that conspicuous consumption imposes is illustrated by the propensity to buy expensive items that are not even seen by outsiders, such as underclothing and kitchen utensils" (108). Coinciding with the desire to enhance one's aesthetic, many people are willing to waste money purchasing a Victoria's Secret bra to increase their cleavage instead of a significantly less expensive and comparative product, due to the brand name. Dubois and Duquesne conducted an explanatory study regarding selling luxury goods and found that, "there is a strong link between a positive attitude towards cultural change and consumption of luxury goods. This indicates that many people buy such goods for what they symbolize" (43). Luxury goods are a symbol of status, as Veblen describes, thus one can acquire status through the acquisition of unnecessary goods. Statistically, the results also showed that "the consumption of luxury goods triples regardless of which level of income is considered, when one compares the most 'on trend' with the most 'off trend'" (Dubois and Duquesne, 40). This supports the argument that people are willing to pay more for luxury goods, even if the product could be purchased for a lower cost, because a designer or brand name is attached to it. For example, millions of people rushed to purchase the newest iPhone, iPhone 5s. Data showed that "the 5s were being used on 7.53% of all iPhones as of Monday, 66 days after it was launched, vs. the 5 which was on 6.16% of all iPhones at the same time post-launch a year ago" (Jones, 2013). This means that there were more people using the iPhone 5s product than the

iPhone 5 at the same comparison point. The previous product had only been on the market for a year before a new product was sold to unnecessarily replace it. These products are examples of conspicuous waste.

Conspicuous waste aligns with and supports Veblen's theory of conspicuous consumption. If there is no element of waste, the good is purchased out of necessity and does not symbolically represent one's status. Veblen asserts that purchasing the "bare necessities of life" does not warrant merit (96-97). Wasteful spending is linked to an excess of wealth that differentiates between "the have" and "the have not" groups. According to Veblen, conspicuous waste "is here called 'waste' because this expenditure does not serve human life or human well-being on the whole, not because it is waste or misdirection of efforts or expenditure as viewed from the standpoint of the individual consumer who chooses it" (97-98). This quote concisely summarizes the duality of interests surrounding consumption; the purchaser deems the good necessary for a higher purpose or satisfaction, while others in society view the purchase as unnecessary. Some people would argue that purchasing braces and cosmetic surgery is wasteful. They would contend that these aesthetic procedures do not better the whole of human well-being. For example, the majority of people who purchase braces do so to straighten their teeth. This is wasteful because teeth are able to achieve their main purpose of chewing one's food regardless of whether one's teeth are straight or not. As straight teeth have become the new norm, wasteful spending has extended to making the interim between crooked and straight teeth more aesthetically appealing, through products such as "Invisilign." Critics would argue that the \$5,000 national average cost for Invisiligns is \$5,000 more than needs to be spent (*Calculate*). While dental insurance covers part of the cost of traditional and Invisilign braces, cosmetic surgery has a much greater out of pocket cost.

Cosmetic surgery aligns with Veblen's definition of conspicuous consumption and waste because consumers, motivated by aesthetic improvement, purchase cosmetic procedures completely out of pocket. As described above, there is a difference between cosmetic and medically necessary plastic surgery procedures, which comes into play when paying for procedures. *Insurance Providers*, a website that provides insurance information and allows you to compare quotes and companies, discusses what plastic surgery procedures are covered and under what circumstances. Covered procedures include surgeries to correct child birth defects, disfigurement due to an accident, and problems that lessen bodily function (Do any). These examples qualify as necessary, or reconstructive, procedures, and differ from cosmetic procedures, which are not covered by insurance companies. As *Insurance Providers* explains, "any procedure that is not medically necessary for an adult will not be covered," which translates into 100% out of pocket costs (Ibid). Thus, approximately all of the \$11 billion dollars spent on cosmetic surgery in 2012 was spent out of pocket. To break this spending down further by the top procedures in 2012, the average cost of a breast augmentation with silicone implants was \$3,918, eyelid surgery costs averaged \$2,724, facelifts came in at \$6,607, and the average cost for a rhinoplasty was \$4,436 (Cosmetic Surgery National 2013, 14). Because small breasts confer no health risks, they would not be covered under health insurance, yet consumers spent a total of \$932,755,917 for breast augmentations in 2012 (Ibid). To put this in perspective, "the national average wage index for 2012 is \$44,321.67;" thus, an average wage earning individual who purchased an average costing breast augmentation would have spent 11% of their wages on an unnecessary procedure (National Average). This example illustrates Veblen's theories of conspicuous consumption and waste because the surgery was a luxury purchased to show one's

ability to spend excess money on a procedure that did not medically benefit oneself or society, in general.

While critics view cosmetic surgery as wasteful spending, consumer demand reinforces Veblen's argument that these goods are consequential to purchasers. The importance of a purchase is validated through Veblen's theory of invidious comparison. According to Veblen, one's wasteful spending on luxury goods is irrelevant if people cannot compare their wealth to others. Expanding on the notion of conspicuous consumption, he explains, "In order to gain and hold the esteem of men it is not sufficient merely to possess wealth or power. The wealth or power must be put in evidence, for esteem is awarded only on evidence" (42). One can have all the money in the world, but one's wealth will go unrecognized unless it is put on display through wasteful spending. Veblen articulates the need of the rich to "put his opulence in evidence" through conspicuous consumption (75). Because cosmetic plastic surgery results in an often noticeable physical change, observers are aware of the consumer's expenditure and a personal, aesthetic comparison can be made. According to Veblen, invidious comparison is not limited to one's net worth but includes, "a comparison in various directions in the manifestation of moral, physical, intellectual, or aesthetic force" (97). One can argue that aesthetic comparison is more prevalent than waste within the celebrity community, because purchasing a cosmetic procedure does not produce much financial strain. When a celebrity is worth millions, or even hundreds of thousands of dollars, a four thousand dollar procedure seems financially insignificant. Thus, celebrities are more concerned with being beautiful and staying young than solely projecting their wealth through conspicuous waste. With a net worth of \$100 million, Bruce Jenner's recent plastic surgery purchases are not going to cause him financial strain (Bruce; Plastic). Alternatively, when an American with an average income purchases a cosmetic procedure, they

are cutting away more than just unwanted fat; a significant part of their economic worth is removed, as well. Veblen's invidious comparison argument articulates what many today recognize as the "keeping up with the Joneses" phenomenon. Under this adopted ideology, one wants what one's neighbor has, but that neighbor often includes celebrities.

Plastic Surgery and Popular Culture

Television's Influence on Aestheticism

Women, as previously noted, are less comfortable with their bodies than men. This dissatisfaction correlates with disparities in plastic surgery acquisition by gender, Davis laments, "the 'aesthetic scaling of bodies' specifically structures the dynamics of gender oppression, rendering ordinary-looking women ugly and deficient and trapping them into a hopeless race for the perfect body," again correlating the dissatisfaction with disparities (5-6). Green and Pritchard identified a difference in body satisfaction between sexes and sought to explain why. Their data analysis showed that family pressure, age, self-esteem, and media pressure all played a role in contributing to body dissatisfaction in women (2003, 219). Media's influence was only statistically significant in affecting women's body satisfaction (2003, 2019 & 220). Brown cites the studies by Feingold and Mazzella (1998) and Striegel-Moore and Franko (2002), which support that women are more "body dissatisfied," correlating this to "the strong media emphasis on women's thinness and attractiveness" (Brown et al. 2005, 78). Brown's study, which built on this previous literature review found, "that even a 5 min exposure to thin-and-beautiful media images results in a more negative body image state than does exposure to images of neutral objects, particularly among young women with high media-ideal internalization levels and social comparison tendencies" (Brown et al. 2005, 78). This implies that people are receptive to the messages promoted by media outlets, including television shows, which have been found to

impact people's decision making. Media's influence on one's choices extends beyond just body image formulation, illustrating the strength of popular culture's ability to formulate opinions and direct decision making. For example, studies showed that issue ads play a formative role in swaying people's opinions, thus plastic surgery shows and celebrity choices were extrapolated to resonate among the viewers.⁴ A study by "Crockett, Pruzinsky, and Persing (2007) suggested that mass media outlets such as cosmetic surgery-themed reality television shows positively influence the decision-making processes of first-time cosmetic surgery patients. Although these social and cultural influences were often pervasive, many respondents appeared to be conscious of them, speaking to their power, but not wholly surrendering their decision-making processes to them" (Adams 2010, 765). Thus, the messages popular culture's television shows depict influence the greater society.

The reality show, *Dr.90210*, brought the process of acquiring plastic surgery to the American population in a very public way. The show aired from 2004 through 2008, and included six seasons, or 75 episodes (*Dr. 90210: 2004-2008*). The series "follows the professional and personal lives of several Beverly Hills plastic surgeons as they nip, tuck, augment and slice their way through their patients" (*Dr. 90210*). The show takes the viewer into the personal lives of the plastic surgeons and the patients, alike, as they discuss the personal decision to obtain surgery to fix some imperfection. The viewer follows the patient through their pre-surgery consultation, watches during the procedure, and witnesses the constructed beauty that emerges from under the bandages at the post-operation follow-up.

⁴ Raymond L. Goldsteen, Karen Goldsteen, James H. Swan and Wendy Clemena, "Harry and Louise and Health Care Reform: Romancing Public Opinion," *Journal of Health Politics, Policy and Law* 6 (2001): 1325-1352; Daniel Bergan and Genevieve Risner, "Issue Ads and the Health Reform Debate," *Journal of Health Politics, Policy and Law* 3 (2012): 513-549.

The show illustrates many plastic surgery trends found within the average American population. As each plastic surgeon introduced themselves throughout the series, they followed their name with some variation of the message “I’m a board certified plastic surgeon.” This identification differentiates the surgeons from those of lesser quality, identified by a lack of board certification. The title “certified” implies that a test was passed and that these surgeons possess greater skills than other surgeons, upheld by their location even within Beverly Hills. Having cosmetic surgery practices in Beverly Hills, located in California, denotes the surgeons’ skill level, as the city has an “estimated median household income in 2011: [of] \$79,499” while the average for the state of California is approximately \$20,000 less (Beverly Hills). The dangers of getting plastic surgery from a non-certified surgeon are addressed in the first episode of the season. One learns of Cari’s struggles to overcome multiple botched breast augmentations performed by a doctor who was previously trained as a dentist but now practices cosmetic surgeries (Climbing the Mountain: Part 2). This reconstructive surgery was only one of a few non-cosmetic procedures highlighted in the six seasons, as reflective of the greater population, Dr. Li explains, “I would say probably 75% of my practice is cosmetic, 25% is reconstructive” (Starting Over). The procedures patients received on the show are also comparable to greater society, as the overwhelmingly female clientele, underwent anesthesia to wake up with enlarged breasts, such as Heather, a more refined nose, like Isabel, or a slimmer waist, like Alicia (Staying Young with Profusion; Growing Old with Delusion; Hollywood Mending, Psychiatrists with Knives). Also, of the 17 episodes watched, only three men received plastic surgery, and one was an African American (Climbing the Mountain: Part 1; Strip the Light Fandango; Snip/Suck). This lack of male presence in the industry depicted in the show reflects the gender’s lack of presence in the industry, as a whole.

The messages promoted in this show, through the patients' plastic surgery journeys, support Veblen's arguments of conspicuous waste and consumption and invidious comparison. Because the show and the doctors' practices stay in business because of the demand to fix people's imperfections, the insecurities of the show's clientele, whose majority is female, align with the greater feeling of body image displeasure expressed by people outside of the show. To illustrate the push for aesthetic beauty, the show opens with the message from Dr. Robert Rey that, "There is a huge pressure to look beautiful here in Los Angeles" (Climbing the Mountain: Part 2). Because Beverly Hills is one of the richer cities in California, the argument could be made that the cost of acquiring these procedures is not significant enough to be considered conspicuous waste, according to Veblen's definition. Yet, as described above, those who do not consider plastic surgery to be an investment, but a frivolous purchase, would consider the spending to be wasteful. Thus, the support for the presence of waste is relative, and not uncontested.

This show, however, does illustrate Veblen's theories of conspicuous consumption and invidious comparison through patient's quest for aesthetic perfection. The presence of conspicuous consumption is more subtle within the *Dr. 90210* series, while the patients and doctors are constantly drawing comparisons between what they have and what they want based on other's physical attributes. The patients do not overtly express that they are buying plastic surgery to express their status by flaunting their wealth. Of the episodes watched, the two blatant examples of conspicuous consumption also included an element of waste. In season one, episode eleven, a patient named Tabitha went to see the plastic surgeon to have her face injected with Botox to get rid of the lines in her face (Hollywood Pressure). She repeatedly stressed that if she could feel her face move after the procedure was complete, she would return for more of the

filler, purchasing a service that already fulfilled its role of smoothing the wrinkles in her face. To the viewer, this procedure appears to be wasteful because her face looks wrinkle-free. Patient Arlene, is also an illustration of conspicuous consumption because of where she recovered post-surgery. Instead of returning home, she went to private wing of a hotel that caters only to people who have undergone plastic surgery and need recovery time. There she was provided meals and a limo back to and forth to the office (*The Fountain of Youth*). This is considered wasteful because most patients just return home to recover.

The majority of the show's examples of conspicuous consumption are illustrated through the patients who allude to the future economic gains the procedures will bring. The patients feel that their increased beauty will help them in their professions. For some patients, this will be accomplished by rejuvenating their look and returning their youth, while others strive to have more a more ideal body type, designated by larger breasts, a smoother stomach, or a less prominent nose. The notion of youth and beauty is consistently linked to economic gain throughout the show and supported by peer-reviewed literature. Noel, one of the first plastic surgeons, reflected that her patients, most of whom were women, sought her services because they were afraid to lose their jobs as their faces began to age (Davis, 27). This sentiment was reinforced by the interviews conducted by Essig. After interviewing 69 cosmetic surgeons and 137 people considering plastic surgery, Essig concluded, "Most patients described America's obsession with youth as driving us to plastic surgery. They also described the media as fueling both our obsession with youth and our desire for plastic beauty" (59). Jones cites previous research regarding the stereotypes of old age explaining how, "media and popular culture's representations of old age overburden us with negative stereotypes. While youth is privileged and is associated with sexuality, independence, beauty and productivity, aging is degraded as

frail, useless, unattractive and dependent (Biggs, H. 2002; Biggs, S. 1999, Bytheway, 1995, Gilleard and Higgs 2000; McDonald, 2001)” (2008, 85). Those who are old are no longer suited to work, thus one should prevent oneself from looking old. Obsession with youth and economic security is repeatedly discussed throughout the popular culture series, *Dr. 90210*. Dr. Rey described his business as “a business of youth” (*The Fountain of Youth*). Wendy, a psychiatrist who underwent a face lift, explicitly links her new youthful face to success in her workplace. She says, “I think that having these changes in my face could conceivably make a difference in terms of my relationships with kids, adolescence, with others I treat” (*Psychiatrists with Knives*). She is implying that her aged face hinders her success in creating an approachable persona, because her face dates her and creates an uninviting outer façade.

The younger generation is more concerned with fixing perceived flaws to increase their beauty than regaining their lost youth. Many of the plastic surgeons’ patients expressed their motivation for plastic surgery as wanting to further their careers. For example, Jaymie, a dental assistant wanted a breast reduction because her large breasts impeded her performance at work (*Starting Over*). This is an example of a medically necessary procedure because her back constantly hurt from the strain of her breasts. Jaymie notes, “Since my surgery, it’s helped my back out a lot when I’m assisting...Before my surgery, I was really self-conscious in this position...[she learned over a patient] I felt like my breasts were right in their face” (*Ibid*). This example is more relevant to the average American who watches this show, yet, as previously noted, even the patients with seemingly unrelated professional goals have an influence on the viewer’s self-image. Because the show takes place in Beverly Hills, many of the patients in the show are entertainers, such as models and singers, who wanted to further their careers. Isabel, for example, is a singer and songwriter who sought plastic surgery to increase airflow through her

nose, but also to improve the look of her nose (Girls Just want to Get Done). She says, “After my surgery, I look forward to having a photo shoot for my album cover” (Ibid). Most commonly, women, who worked in the entertainment industry, enhanced their breast size so that they could have a more fruitful career. The opening vignette of Season three, episode seven, featured Heather; “Heather is a model who wants to make it big” (Staying Young with Profusion, Growing Old with Delusion). Heather says, ““And if I had full like full breasts, oh, my God, I’d like—I’d conquer the world,” followed by, “See, okay, but once I get my boobs done, I’ll be making so much more money I’ll be able to shop all the time” (Ibid).

These are examples of Veblen’s theory of conspicuous consumption because they reinforce the commodification of beauty and how aestheticism leads to a better economic standing. By retaining one’s job, through facelifts, or getting a new job, though breast augmentations, one upholds that, “The primary message disseminated by this [cosmetic] industry is that as long as the correct commodity is purchased and used, the body itself will be a tempting commodity in the market of sexual attraction” (Lupton, 37). Thus, one’s beauty becomes one’s worth. The more beautiful one is, the more one is worth, leading to one earning more income and perks that translate into the ability to participate in Veblen’s theory of conspicuous consumption. Heather explains this as perfectly as her new body; the better she looks, the more money she will make, and the more money she can spend. Even if the average person watching this show does not want a breast augmentation so that she can become a better model, the underlying logic transcends the occupation, as the new aesthetic norm is developed. Attractiveness has been found to impact hiring potential. A study conducted by Dipbove et al. found that “Regardless of interviewer sex and attractiveness, highly qualified applicants were preferred over poorly qualified applicants, male applicants were preferred over female applicants, and attractive

candidates were preferred over unattractive candidates” (288). Thus, a younger, more “perfect” woman has a greater chance of being hired than an “ugly” person. In this instance, Veblen’s theory of conspicuous consumption illustrates a circular pattern of logic and purchasing power. If one invests in oneself, through purchasing plastic surgery, the return on one’s new look will lead to future income security, such that attractive people are more easily hired. Ranking attractiveness involves comparing different individuals on their beauty. Striving for beauty through comparison, creates a norm, such that “Cosmetic surgery has become a medium through which individuals can better align themselves, specifically their physical appearance, with normative expectations and standards of attractiveness” (Adams 2010, 756). This alignment comes from active comparison, which dictates a standard. Testimony of model, Jada, from *Dr. 90210*’s season six, episode four links earning potential, and Veblen’s conspicuous consumption and invidious comparison (Lovely Lady Lump). After her surgery Jada explained, “I have a lot more fans now. I have a lot more work.” When all of the models were standing together, one expressed in reference to Jada’s breast augmentation, “We all look like clones in our [bathing] suites. Now you’re one of us,” (Ibid). Jada met the standard breast size, determined by comparison, “And its standard of worth becomes the norm of reputability for the community. The observance of these standards, in some degree of approximation, becomes incumbent upon all classes lower in the scale” (Veblen, 84). Thus, the comparison of breast size denotes that Jada is of the same worth as the other models.

The show, *Dr. 90210*, thoroughly depicts Veblen’s theory of invidious comparison, a theme that is also prevalent in the show, *The Swan*. Many of the patient’s the Beverly Hills plastic surgeons operate on refer to the characteristics of someone when discussing their decision to undergo a cosmetic procedure. While the patient says that this is something that she wants for

herself, an element of comparison towards society's aesthetic norms is present. For example, self-proclaimed ugly duckling, Jenny, explained how she "never felt pretty enough" growing up with her sisters who "didn't have bad teeth or bad skin" (The Family Ties that Bind). Jenny purchased plastic surgery after years of comparison to her sisters, but this did not specifically influence the procedure she acquired, as in Heather's case. Heather, as mentioned above underwent a breast augmentation. When talking about why she wanted this procedure, she expressed, "I always wanted breasts like Sascha's. I think that now we have the same level of perfection" (Staying Young with Profusion, Growing Old with Delusion). Heather's perfection depended on how she perceived her beauty to compare to her friend. She bought breasts because she deemed her status to be less than Sascha's because she was flat-chested. Invidious comparison can lead one to purchase a good to increase their status, but one can also purchase a good so one's status does not change. For example, in Season three, episode three, three sisters came in for breast augmentations as one sister joked that if her sister was getting better ones, then she wanted them as well (Boobs, Dogs, and Snakes: Man's Best Friends). The argument that invidious comparison is present in popular culture's representation of plastic surgery was not just supported by the patients but was illustrated by the providers, as well. The plastic surgery industry is competitive in itself. Dr. Rey explains that he goes to the gym because one cannot be a slob (Climbing the Mountain: Part 1). He later professes that, "I am in the business of youth. So I teach by example, too," stating that "If you're a slob, you're not going to make it" (The Fountain of Youth). Just as the patient's judge themselves in comparison to others' aesthetics, they also compare their surgeons to their ideal type of person they want to operate on them.

This idea of invidious comparison is the main theme of the reality show, *The Swan*.

Viewers can watch one episode of the show, which ran for one season in 2004, and understand

its format; “16 contestants, all women, subject themselves to cosmetic surgery in a competition to see who will win the beauty pageant held at the end of the series. The show selects women characterized by the program as “ugly ducklings” and offers them cosmetic surgery to determine who will emerge as the victorious “swan”... participants work with a therapist, trainer, cosmetic dentist, and ‘life coach.’” (Turner). Each episode begins with the introduction of a “swan,” followed by a roundtable discussion of her flaws.⁵ Proposed procedures are flashed on the television while highlighting the perceived imperfection on a picture of the woman. This process is repeated for the second participant. After each contestant receives the cosmetic procedures, the two women are judged on aesthetics at the end of the show. The swan voted to have the greatest transformation at end of each episode advances to the pageant. As compared to *Dr. 90210*, *The Swan* depicts plastic surgery as more of a game, naming a winner and a loser at the end of each show. The show promotes the message that, despite all of her procedures, the loser still not beautiful enough.

The process by which the women underwent the surgeries and the message the show projects about beauty, were met with criticism. Beverly Hills plastic surgeon, Peter Fodor, M.D., reflected on the fact that contestants were receiving as many as twenty procedures, “and doing it on national television, and as part of a contest—that adds unnecessary emotional trauma” (Green, et al.). The show was even hailed “the most sadistic reality series of the decade” by journalist Jennifer Pozner, in her book, *Reality Bites Back* (The Swan). As discussed above, the messages these shows promote about ideal beauty influence viewer’s self-perception. The messages of little self-worth and the cry for plastic surgery to fix all emotional scars can have a detrimental effect on body satisfaction. For example, Swan Beth Lay, after commenting that she

⁵ Swan Sylvia after ear pinning, chin implant, upper lip lift, nose job, boob job, etc. by Dr. Hayworth. *YouTube*. Retrieved from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8ZVQcUqoWEo>. The following synopsis was drawn from the author, who watched the show when it first aired, and the cited You-Tube clip.

thought her husband cheated on her said, “I guess I didn’t leave him because I guess I’m afraid no one else would ever love me” (Swan Beth Lay). Swan Sylvia also expressed high body dissatisfaction and a lack of trust (Swan Sylvia). While Pozner criticized the show’s message, *The Swan* did accurately represent the most frequently acquired cosmetic procedures and uphold Veblen’s theory of invidious comparison.

The Swan contestants’ transformations were consistent with the standard of beauty, as defined by cosmetic surgery procedure demands. While there was criticism regarding the show’s message, the completely female contestant pool is only ten percent greater than the gender’s representation in the overall pool of cosmetic surgery acquisition. Procedure lists, available for eight of “the swans,” display recurring aesthetic imperfections. Surgeons used liposuction on each of these eight contestants and each also received a brow lift (Green, 2004). Seven out of the eight had bleaching and veneers put on their teeth, six had a breast augmentation, and five had rhinoplasty procedures (Ibid). The procedures these contestants received overlap with the most frequently invasive surgical procedures purchased in 2012, but not entirely. Liposuction, breast augmentation, and rhinoplasty procedures are consistent between 2012 statistics and *The Swan*’s competitors. The show’s classification of participants as “competitors” speaks to Veblen’s criteria of invidious comparison, as described in the previous examples and definitions. The competition at the end of every episode is the ultimate comparison; “the end sought by accumulation is to rank in high comparison with the rest of the community” (Veblen, 31). At the end of the show, one woman ranks higher than the other, asserting her status in a group of greater aesthetic value. Without comparing the contestants on their new looks, one swan could not be crowned the queen, as opposed to the runner-up. To reiterate the messages portrayed in the reality shows, *Dr. 90210* and *The Swan*, one can look at the prevalence of Veblen’s theories in

the lives of two celebrities who are known for their surgically constructed faces, Joan River and Michael Jackson.

Celebrity Influence on Aestheticism and Their Depiction of Veblen's Theory

Celebrities are compared to each other on the benchmarks of wealth and beauty; individuals outside of popular culture compare themselves to each other and celebrities. Studies have shown that celebrities have an influential effect on individuals' behaviors. Celebrities, as well as plastic surgery shows, play a role in one's self-image formulation. Jones describes how "Once upon a time, we fantasized about which movie star would play us in the story of our life; now we wonder what cosmetic surgery we could get in order to be movie stars ourselves" (3). This reflects the idea that increased aestheticism, resulting from cosmetic procedures, can lead to a competitive edge and make someone a star. Level of attractiveness, compared both within social strata and between them, has been argued to lead to future economic opportunities, as evident in celebrity testimony, as illustrated in *Dr. 90210*. Joan Rivers reiterates the quest for youth explained in *Dr. 90210's* discussion of age stereotypes. As Essig describes, "Rivers is a TV star. TV and movie stars have always utilized the miracles of cosmetic surgery to look good in the two-dimensional space they inhabit" (85). By regaining her youth through plastic surgery, she has learned to turn her appearance into a commodity and further her career. She has even joked about her plastic surgery use as material in her comedic routines. Just like the models that used their enhanced breasts to increasing their income, River uses her plastic surgery experiences to support her livelihood as a comedian, which creates a cycle of increased wealth that can be spent on plastic surgery leading to longer employment. Michael Jackson, another celebrity whose face gained celebrity, exemplified conspicuous consumption, like Rivers, and invidious comparison.

Before America, and the world's eyes, Michael Jackson transformed from an African American boy to a white man. His transformation through cosmetic plastic surgery exemplifies Veblen's theory of conspicuous consumption and invidious comparison. Jackson was quoted saying, "I can afford it, I want it, so I'm going to have it" (Davis, 95). This statement asserts that Jackson has the capacity to purchase goods that he wants, but does not necessarily need, upholding an element of waste as he is seen squandering his money away. Jackson's surgeries can also be seen as promoting his career; a newspaper reports, "The brightest stars are known for their transformations over the years, but none have matched the extremes of Michael Jackson, whose ever-shifting facial features became as much of a trademark as his prodigious talent" (The Ever-Changing Face). His transition from black to white is reflective of Veblen's theory of invidious comparison. There are comparisons made between people of different races, and "early cosmetic surgery consumers were lured by the promise of a body free from the racial features that marked them as degenerate" (Essig, 10). For example, Michael Jackson has multiple rhinoplasty procedures, bleached his skin, and had Restylane injections (Hall). These procedures aimed to give Jackson the look he had always wanted, a Caucasian one. This ability to purchase white features extended, attempted to counter the present discrimination between races. Some individuals of Asian heritage, such as Koreans, Chinese, Japanese, and Asian Americans, create folded eyelids through plastic surgery to craft "Western Eyes" (Davis, 89). Folded eyelids represent western culture and "the white," who is above all other ethnicities. Davis expands saying, "In Western culture, the white, propertied male has enjoyed the normative position against which all others-women, the working classes, or the ethnically marginalized- are measured and found wanting." (5). Through Veblen's theory of invidious comparison, ethnic

minorities realized they were being discriminated against and some sought cosmetic fixes to enhance their position within the hierarchy of beauty.

Conclusion

Studies statistically support that beauty is important to Americans, but the constant drive for aesthetic perfection is all too evident in everyday acquisition of plastic surgery. Each year, millions of Americans undergo plastic surgery procedures to either align with society's definition of beauty or to maintain such. The demand for plastic surgery is correlated to the fact that many people do not find their bodies to be the socially designated "perfect." Plastic surgery allows one to either assert one's status, or create it, in comparison to others. Celebrities and reality television shows influence viewership, thus the messages portrayed in popular culture, helps formulate how others' view themselves. While the show, *The Swan*, lacks a positive body-image message, the show's concept succinctly describes Veblen's theory of invidious comparison through outright competition. Episodes from *Dr. 90210* and the brief study of Michael Jackson and Joan Rivers also focus on comparison, but introduce Veblen's conspicuous consumption, as well. Watson "suggested that long-term media literacy interventions are more effective at decreasing body dissatisfaction than short-term media literacy interventions. However, both short- and long-term media literacy interventions that challenge the perceived realism of the media have the potential to reduce internalization of sociocultural ideals" (Watson 2006, 398). Just as media's portrayal of aesthetic importance can shape people's opinions in the negative and lower one's body perceptions, it can also have the opposite effect. Thus, media and television shows should not promote an atmosphere that encourages low-self-esteem.

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